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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that a major obstacle for intermediate-level learners of English as a Second Language is the transition from thinking in the native language to thinking in English, that this transition must be made before proceeding from the intermediate level, and that it should begin as early as possible in language training. Early in-class writing assignments such as summarizing an article, debating a topic, solving a problem, or answering a thought-provoking question in writing can uncover students' thinking ability in English. Analysis of these can help identify students whose words and sentences are clearly translations from their first language or whose thoughts are vague, scattered, irrelevant, or confused, all indications that the student has not made the transition to English thought. A technique for facilitating transition, once need is determined, involves having the class free-write for 10 minutes, expressing themselves as quickly as possible in English without concern for errors or conventions. Before the next meeting, the teacher makes corrections without evaluation, and comments on content. Students rewrite the passage with the translation given by the teacher immediately. The free write/translate method has been found effective in enabling students to think in English and is useful for individualizing instruction of students with different first languages. (MSE)

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THINKING IN ENGLISH

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One of the major hurdles that intermediate non-native students have in preparation for their advanced courses is making the transition from thinking in their first language to thinking in English. It seems critical that this transition be made at the intermediate level before they proceed, or they do not advance in language use and communication skills; they are stuck on a learning plateau.

The transition to thinking in English, therefore, must be facilitated and stressed as early as possible in their education. I believe that instructors should test for this ability in students and take steps to assist the transition to thinking in the target language. Early on, in-class writing assignments can uncover a student's thinking ability in English. Students can be asked to summarize an article, debate a topic, solve a problem or answer a thought-provoking question in writing. They should write where the teacher can see their thinking/writing process.

Evaluation of these writing assignments will identify those students whose words and sentences are clearly translations from their first language, or whose thoughts are vague, scattered, off-topic or confused--all likely indications that these students have not made the transition to English thought. If they do not make the move to thinking in English, will they ever be fully able to express themselves in written, academic English? There is an unmistakable connection between inner dialog and writing.

Peter Elbow points out in *Writing with Power* experience must be linked to thinking and language is the medium of thought (60). Vygotsky's well-known theory in *Thought and Language* explains the importance of inner thought (47).

> He says that "Thought development is determined by language, ...intellectual growth is contingent on [the learner's] mastering the social means of thought" (51).

Toby Fulwiler, in *Teaching with Writing*, agrees with James Britten in "Shaping at the Point of Utterance," that "'knowledge' is a process of knowing rather than a storehouse of the known" and that this takes place through language (4)

Other writers see language as irrevocably intertwined with organized thought which translates into communicative ability. Much of the transition to thinking in the second language is a subconscious process, yet this is a key phase in language

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acquisition. If the second language is never subconsciously integrated, the student will not progress in communicating in that language. If the language the student uses is, for example, Chinese, and he is experiencing his world in Chinese thoughts, can this be the same meaningful thought and its relationship to experience as it would be in English?

My bi-lingual and tri-lingual students tell me that it is very difficult to analyze, compose and write on a topic in more than one language. One student was processing experience in three languages, Illocano, Chinese and English. She agreed that she had to focus on thinking in English exclusively when she was composing her college essays, or she would get totally confused writing ideas which could not be translated into English because they had been composed in Chinese or Illocano expressions, phrasing, and/or concepts. The entire process of thought development, analysis and composition had to be in one language. This is the goal I am attempting to reach with English for these non-native speakers.

After determining that certain students are not processing thought in English, what can an instructor do to facilitate the switch into English? One method I have been using involves direct intervention or translation from the students' faulty English into corrected English by the instructor.

Step 1: Using the Elbow writing process to promote access to ideas, I ask my intermediate ESL students--in class--to freewrite for 10 minutes. Freewriting involves writing quickly without stopping to consider errors or conventions but just letting words flow. The students are not to worry about spelling or grammar as they write on every other line. They try to express in English words as quickly as possible on familiar topics.

Step 2: After the 10 minutes of writing, I collect the papers and, before the next class period, I will go over each one with a colored pen and write corrections in the line above. No evaluation of the writing is given, but I do make comments on the content and affirm or discuss the issues in an informal discoursive manner.

Step 3: When it is returned to them, they must rewrite [that same day] the corrected passage with the translation that I have given them; this will be kept together with previously corrected passages.

Step 4: At the end of a certain period I ask them to compile a table of contents, arrange the papers in chronological order, and hand them in for a grade based only on the number of pages and the neatness of the corrected work.

The freewrite/translate method has proven most effective in enabling students to think in English. The students love it because they are getting the kind of feedback they want. That

is, they want someone to show them how to express an idea in English. The freewrite/translate method does this in a non-judgmental manner that encourages and supports their efforts to express thoughts freely in English. I notice that this technique has the most profound effect on their writing ability in English and they confirm this.

Some of the negatives about this method are that it involves a strong commitment from the instructor. The translating of errors into corrected English requires extra time, but a class of 18 takes me less than an hour if I don't get carried away responding to their written content with notes. The major commitment is remembering to take time out of the class for it, and then keeping up with their rewrites, which must be done right away to be effective. It does not work if they do the freewriting out of class as some will get editorial assistance from friends, and time constraints cannot be controlled. But the benefits to the students outweigh the extra effort.

I have found that when the students find themselves forced to think in English for each 10 minute freewrite, many of them don't want to stop at 10 minutes because it is such a growing experience for them. The first writings at the beginning of the term bear clear witness, when compared to the final ones, that they have radically improved their sentence structures, their ability to express their ideas in English, the volume of their writing, their overall grammar skill and most of all, their writing confidence.

This freewrite/translate method is a sure way to individualize instruction particularly with classes of mixed nationalities who each have their own particular problems. With this method, I can address each one's problems separately and provide individualized feedback. I can also utilize these spontaneous writings as the basis of grammar instruction, or I will show some of the errors anonymously on the overhead to correct as a class. It is also an effective activity for any basic and/or remedial students who are not processing information as an inner dialog.

I believe it would be an effective method for foreign language instructors to adopt, particularly where the students rarely have opportunities to use the language they are learning. The students who come to enjoy this technique and show definite improvement in thinking clearly in English have made a major, subconscious transition to processing thought in English that will enable them to progress both communicatively and cognitively in college.

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